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Tryin' to Get My Mojo Workin'

Emily Ford

July 7, 2010 @ 6:00 am

Muddy Waters, can you help me get my [mojo working](#) ^[1]?

I have a problem. Several months ago I realized I'd lost my librarian mojo and since that time I've been struggling to reclaim it. Being the person that I am, I have been hyper-analyzing my mojo loss. I have been disenchanted at work, feeling weary and dissatisfied, and yet, it feels like it's all out of my control. This (perhaps self-indulgent) post is a reflection on my personal struggle to understand what IS my librarian mojo, and what can I do to keep it going and get it back when it appears to have gone missing.

First, let me take a moment to describe what I mean by librarian mojo. Mojo is pretty, clear, defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* online as:

"Magical power, voodoo, the art of casting spells; a charm or talisman used in casting such spells. More generally, esp. in recent use: a power, force, or influence of any kind (often with sexual connotations). Freq. attrib. and in to have (also get) one's mojo working (chiefly fig. and allusive)." (accessed 6/21/10.

Thanks, [Multnomah County Library](#) ^[2]!

Thanks to popular culture we might immediately think of Austin Powers when we think of mojo, or maybe the [book](#) ^[3] by [Marshall Goldsmith](#) ^[4] that was published last year. (I heard it was decent, though haven't had a chance to read it yet.) And of course there is an entry in the [Urban Dictionary](#) ^[5] for [mojo](#) ^[6].

But what does mojo have to do with being a librarian? Think about it. Librarians have bags of tricks or spells that we cast about. A trick might be our ability to find that book, in the way we are able to perform a reference interview, in the charm of checking out books to people and sharing information. We have the power to arm people with information and do so easily and quickly. We know how to think critically. We know how to teach, we are expert searchers, we have resilience and passion. So what happened that made me feel like I didn't have my mojo, any more? I still had the same skills the same training, education and experience, but what had happened? There had been a course of events, some of which were beyond my control, that led to my dissatisfaction, frustration, and burnout at work. This loss of mojo was pretty startling for me. I am 30 years old and I have only held my MLS for 3 years.

If you do any research on the topic you will find a plethora of work written on burnout in libraries and job satisfaction. There's also a wealth of work written about failure, mistakes, and job satisfaction outside our small world of libraries. I can't tackle all the knowledge out there, but you'll find some some articles listed below as further reading. Just know that they're only the tip of the iceberg.

Systems Failure and Mojo

We are dependent on systems. We depend on systems as simple as work schedules to those as complicated as databases and other high-tech implementations. As technologies evolve our subsequent dependence on those technologies grows. Our dependence on systems makes us more vulnerable to systems failure that is beyond our control and a potential subsequent loss of mojo.

When I first started working at my current place of employ I was hired to work on a project called Oregon Health Go Local. I'd spent two years working on this project when the project sponsor, the [National Library of Medicine](#) ^[7], [announced](#) ^[8] it would be phasing out all Go Local projects. (You may recall that part of this work inspired a previous post of mine about [Outreach](#) ^[9].) This is a great example of a systems or tool failure. The fact that Go Local databases would no longer exist is the loss of a countless hours of work by libraries and librarians all over the United States. It was not that the NLM made a bad decision. In fact, the NLM made the right decision based on their extensive analysis of Go Local projects (IMHO), but it was a decision that affected me and numerous other individuals. A project to which I had dedicated a lot of work and energy failed. But projects end and I was surprisingly okay with the discontinuation of Oregon Health Go Local. Even though I was okay with the end of the project, it still called into question my librarian mojo.

Power outages are another good example of a systems failure. Without power you have no online tools, no lights to even read the [red books](#) ^[10] (LCSH Subject Headings in print) or your call number cheat sheet, and maybe, as Guy Robertson (2004) points out in his article "Lights Out! Dealing with Power Outages in Your Library," the library emergency flashlight might have been misplaced. What librarian mojo do we have when we rely on technologies, even if it is the lights?

Think about this in a different context. Who are librarians and what power do librarians have to help a patron find print material without the catalog? Say I had a patron who was looking for a book about diabetic foot problems. Without walking through the stacks, one aisle at a time, I would be at a loss to find this kind of item. Why? Because I rely on the electronic catalog to help me navigate subject headings. I rely on the tools of our profession to practice my librarian mojo. My charm is that I understand how to find out that books on diabetes are shelved with the other WK835 books, not that I KNOW that books on diabetes are shelved there. I rely on tools that operate beyond my immediate control, to practice that librarian mojo. A lot of my mojo relies on the tools I use every day. (And what does this say about our [librarian identities?](#) ^[11]) While a power outage or catalog downtime is certainly not the be all end all problem, I think it points to technology and tool dependence that can negatively effect librarian mojo.

The fact is, my librarian mojo has come to be dependent on the tools I use, not the skills I have. It's a lot harder to wield my mighty skills set without the tools. And when these tools fail, I feel like I've failed, and, my librarian mojo suffers. It's not that every time a little problem occurs I experience a complete loss of mojo. Librarians, by nature, are great problem solvers and find great work-arounds. It's that all of the little failures and mistakes can build up, and after a time it can start affecting us negatively, if we let it.

Library and librarian tools that enable me to use my mojo are mostly proprietary. At work I rely on commercial software

developers and commercial vendor products. I find it incredibly frustrating, that using proprietary tools like an ILS, a collection development tool, or a research database can put my mojo out of my hands. Try contacting a database vendor to ask why something is broken and to get it fixed? When it's not working I can't wield my mighty mojo to help patrons find that article or do that search, and my librarian mojo doesn't allow me to fix the database myself or have a colleague do it. I think it would help if we were able to be some of these providers ourselves. We need to have library programmers on library staff to assist in being less dependent on commercial products that can hinder our librarian mojo. (Brett [wrote](#) ^[12] about this a while back.)

We see this commercial dependence even more in collection development, purchasing and licensing. What happens to the mojo of librarians when libraries can no longer pay the rising costs of journal subscriptions and are possibly falling victim to [unethical library vendors](#) ^[13]? For example, the University of California is having trouble with the pricing of Nature Publishing Group publications. Due to these issues the university may conduct a [boycott](#) ^[14] of the publisher, thereby not providing access to highly used titles. What's going to happen to librarian mojo when libraries no longer have the money to buy the tools that enable us to do our jobs?

Meredith Farkas makes the distinction that via consortia we might be able to fight for more ethical practices from our vendors. But I wonder if relying on vendors is really the end solution. Can we not be tool creators and providers at the same time? Certainly not with budgets that allocate for collections and tools over personnel. We need programmers and technologies that we don't have.

What excites me about librarianship is to advocate for people and groups who need advocates. I want to provide and make accessible as much information as possible, and commercial and tool dependence hinder me from doing as much as I want. Because of libraries' commercial dependence and shrinking budgets I can't do as much I would like. I feel frustrated and disheartened by the behemoth issues that face libraries and that hinder me from doing my best. I didn't become a librarian to overcome seemingly insurmountable barriers, I became a librarian to help people.

Despite all of these possible systems failures, personal frustrations, and mojo-loss inducing situations, failure isn't necessarily a bad thing. Andy Burkhardt thinks we're [experts](#) ^[15] at it. From failure we can learn to improve. In his recent article *Being Wrong and Learning from "Partial Success"* Walt Crawford (2010) discusses failure. He points out that we hate to talk about them and admit to our failures. But talking about and studying failure is necessary.

Lisa German (2009) suggests in her piece about project management *No One Plans to Fail, They Fail to Plan*, that if you fail it's because you didn't plan well enough. I disagree. Mostly. (BP's recent gulf oil dilemma certainly points to a failure to plan.) I agree more with Daniel Chudnov (2008), who, in his article *Failure is Always an Option*, argues that failure is normal and should be embraced. Moreover, he stresses that we should PLAN on failing. For example, I could keep a call number cheat sheet at the reference desk for those times when the catalog is down or the power is out. I could download a flashlight app or WorldCat app to my phone. I could also work on recognizing when my mojo is being affected and try to reign it back to the positive side.

At some point we will make mistakes and we will fail at something. But when do we need to have contingency plans? That's the whole concept behind disaster planning. But do we do it as much for our tools as we do for our buildings and physical materials? Where I work we have a group that's looking at contingency planning for access to e-resources in the event of a disaster. Another example of small systems failure is when an e-book isn't accessible. Just this morning I assisted a patron in requesting a print copy of an e-book that wasn't working via our library consortium. If this had failed I would have helped the patron fill out an interlibrary loan request. Small failures like this are easy to work around. When we can problem solve and when we can have contingency plans in place we can diminish the blow of the failure. Still, when added up small everyday systems failures can have great impact on our librarian mojo.

That Inner Mojo and Getting it Back (Or, a lot of it is in your head.)

Most of the time systems failure is out of our control, but how we react to those failures and our general inner mojo is not. A while back Ellie wrote a [terrific review](#) ^[16] of the book [How We Decide](#) ^[17] by Jonah Lehrer. In it she provides examples about Lehrer's insights regarding the balance between emotion and rationality. Essentially, how we think about failure can have a lot to do with our mojo.

In my case it wasn't just the end of one project or one system failure that resulted in my mojo loss. As is often the case it was a number of things happening all at once. Things at work were frustrating. I wasn't liking my day to day work, I didn't feel that any of my idealism about libraries and librarianship were being tapped or utilized. I didn't feel like I was learning or affecting my community positively, the major project on which I had spent close to 2 years of my professional life had ended in failure, and this all culminated into a ball of the work blahs. I had lost my mojo.

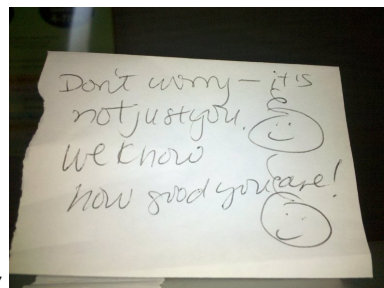
Part of my blahs had to do with the disillusionment about libraries and professional work life in general. When I started working I was ready, fresh-faced, young, naive, excited, and full of ideas. After a few years of too many meetings, too much university bureaucracy, budget cuts, unstable temporary employment, and Oregon Health Go Local's phase out I felt burned out and mojo-less. Basically, I let it get to me. And come to find out Anitra Steele (2009) mentions that "New librarians are perhaps at a higher risk of burnout than veteran coworkers. One article states this is because idealistic expectations and practice do not often coincide."

But I love being a librarian and I don't want to stop being one. I love that I have the education and skills that I mentioned at the beginning of this post (critical thinking, etc.). I just want my mojo back. And no one's going to give it to me, so I've got to take ownership of my librarian mojo. I've got to start thinking differently. I've got to find pro-active solutions.

So what have I done to attempt to reclaim it? First, I went on [ALA Connect's](#) ^[18] Mentor Connect (a portal within ALA Connect that lets mentors and mentees find each other) and requested some mentorship and advice. My mentor helped me think about what I want from librarianship, what kind of librarian I want to be, and helped me think about what actions I could take to work toward that goal. When I expressed an interest to pursue academic library work at a more general university or at a community college rather than at a health sciences institution, my mentor encouraged me to seek out professional development opportunities that would fulfill my professional needs in this area and make me an attractive job candidate for future opportunities. In this vein I decided to remain active in ALA and cut back on my involvement in health sciences by not renewing memberships in health sciences library organizations when they are due.

I've also been going through a subconscious ritual of daily affirmations at work. (I'm being serious.) I have taped to my computer monitor at work a note from a co-worker (written to me in a meeting when she knew I was losing my mojo). It

says,



"Don't worry—it's not just you. We know how good you are!"

I went on vacation during which I read books for pleasure, spent time with friends and my partner, and was even out of cell phone and e-mail range.

I went to ALA Annual where I got inspired about librarianship by talking to inspiring people and gaining a more whole library perspective than my niche in a medical school setting. I was able to chat with librarians who work in public libraries, community college libraries, small private college libraries, and this year's class of [Emerging Leaders](#) ^[19]. I attended programs that were of interest to me such as the [Google Book Search Settlement Panel](#) ^[20], and the [Open Access Debate](#) ^[21]. I attended [Library Advocacy Day](#) ^[22] and met with my state representatives to talk about issues facing libraries. These experiences re-energized me and reminded me why I became a librarian.

And the biggest thing of all is that just the other day, (July 1st), I started a new job description and dropped my work hours to half-time. Instead of working as a Reference Librarian, I am now Scholarly Communication Librarian. I'll be working with the research faculty and students to provide education about the [NIH Public Access Policy](#) ^[23], issues in open access, publishing, and author rights. These new duties will enable me to be more involved with why I wanted to be a librarian in the first place: to advocate for something about which I'm passionate—equitable and open access to information.

I am lucky to have this luxury—to be able to afford to work half-time—and the leadership in my library supports this change. Working half-time will enable me to re-discover hobbies like riding my bike, gardening, cooking, and learning book arts. It will enable me to come to work refreshed and be able to HAVE that mojo that I need to do a good job. Feeling like a whole person has a lot to do with my librarian mojo and this is going to be the best solution for me to get my mojo working again.

My mojo's not all the way back, but what I'm going to do from here on out is really celebrate my accomplishments like Robert Moran (2009) suggests in *What a Great Place to Work!*. I will find the things that I find fulfilling about library work and concentrate on them. I'm going to frame my degrees and hang in them in my office at work to remind myself why I'm a librarian, and aim to work towards being what I want to be. I'm going to read books like [How We Decide](#) ^[17], and [Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#) ^[24] and learn about Peter Drucker's work (whom Kim [mentioned](#) ^[25] a while back) to try to learn how to keep failures from affecting my mojo. Finally, I'm going to concentrate on that feeling described by one of my pals as "the moment when you remember what it's like to be you when you're happy again."

So, dear readers. Have you ever lost your librarian mojo? Have you experienced burnout? What caused it and how did you handle it?

Extra special thanks to Laura Zeigen, Ellie Collier, and Miriam Rigby for providing thoughtful feedback on this post.

Citations and Further Readings:

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Reiter, M., & Goldsmith, M. (2009). *Mojo: How to get it, how to keep it, how to get it back if you lose it*. New York: Hyperion.

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Steele, A. (2009). Flying with the Phoenixes: Avoiding job burnout as a librarian and manager. *Children's Librarianship* 7(3), 51-52.

You might also be interested in:

- [How Do You Say No?](#) ^[26]
- [Our Librarian Bodies. Our Librarian Selves.](#) ^[27]
- [The Importance of Thinking about Thinking](#) ^[16]
- [Resilience vs. Sustainability: The Future of Libraries](#) ^[28]
- [Vision and Visionaries: A Whole Bunch of Questions to Start off 2010 \(As if you didn't have enough of those already\)](#)

14 Comments To "Tryin' to Get My Mojo Workin'"

14 Comments ([Open](#) | [Close](#))

#1 Comment By [Derik Badman](#) On July 7, 2010 @ 7:32 am

"Try contacting a database vendor to ask why something is broken and to get it fixed?"

As a (recent) member of the evil vendor side of the world, I'll say that it doesn't have to be as bad as it is with most vendors. Most of them just seem to have lost (if they ever had it) a concept of service, which, in a world of open source options, is what they should be focusing. In my company, you contact us with an issue, and we'll fix it, often in the same day.

Also, I always found it very helpful to have a certain conception outside of the tools. Knowing the organization of if not all the subjects at least those of relevance to my work was very helpful.

I don't think I had time to lose my mojo. I unexpectedly (and positively) switched jobs before I really got to that point.

It is interesting the thematic connections between this and Kim's recent post. Are we having a collective crisis of identity?

#2 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On July 7, 2010 @ 8:15 am

I've heard wonderful things about where you work, Derik. I agree that a lot of vendors don't have a good service model but I certainly acknowledge that there are those that do. I think my point was that after a while all of these things can get me down-including trying to get our tools to work- and a lot of it has to do with mindset, too. Maybe my mindset should be to work toward pushing vendors to have service models that work for libraries. I guess it seems like such an issue that I feel helpless in tackling it. Or I'm concentrating too much on the negatives. (Always a possibility.)

#3 Comment By [Derik Badman](#) On July 7, 2010 @ 1:13 pm

I think there's a certain feeling of futility that librarians have in relation to vendors. Yet, aren't they the customers? the people sending money in? I think this came in a previous post (or maybe a few) how librarians need to demand certain things from the people they are sending money to. For many many libraries that's going to be a more possible course of action than going open source or hiring their own programmers.

This is probably something ALA should be doing more of. Wielding the collective consumer might of the librarians in the association.

#4 Comment By [Phil](#) On July 7, 2010 @ 9:30 pm

Two things (to begin): if you don't believe what you're doing is worthwhile, then you're going to lose your mojo. If you do believe that and you're still losing your mojo, then you're either working for people who under-appreciate you, working for people who appreciate you but don't realize that you'd like for them to acknowledge it once in a while, or frustrated that the people you're serving under-appreciate you or fail to see that you'd like a little recognition now and then.

I'm burnt out, too. For me, it's a multi-faceted thing: 1) I think management are mis-managing the library and that their priorities are way out of whack (i.e. obsession with cosmetic improvements and little concern for substance/quality), 2) I get little to no feedback from my superiors (and while some people don't need that, I actually like a little bit of "keep up the good work" now and then), and 3) I'm frustrated with the way our society undervalues libraries (though if that's anyone's fault, it's ours). The first issue I can't do much about. The employees here have unionized to fight for our benefits and such, but we don't really have a say in the day-to-day operations/non-wage- and benefit-related policy-making/mission formulation, so what the fuck do I do? The second issue I can't do much about beyond moaning about it in this here comment. The third I can do a little about, though I could do a lot more if I were admin or management.

I work in a public library. I think we should be fostering social discourse, serving as a community space, showing the community how the library can be a hub of discourse and learning, where issues of relevance to the community (e.g. economic and political) can be discussed and debated, etc. We do make some efforts in that direction, but I'd love to see those efforts amped up a hell of a lot more. I mean, honestly, the onus is on us to convince all taxpayers of our value to the community and society at-large. If we fail to provide something for everyone beyond access to free popular DVDs (and books) and services to the small portion of the population with children, then we've failed and have little grounds to complain when taxpayers at-large vote to cut our funding.

Anyway, just a bit of a rant that I share from time to time. Yeah, I could continue to beat my head against the proverbial wall, but that just leads to more despair and diminished mojo. But, in all seriousness, if libraries don't get their asses in gear, we're going to continue to see our funding cut and worse. As such, I'm hoping people like you (and me) end up in positions of power sooner rather than later because far too many of the people in power are far too content with the status quo.

#5 Comment By [Kat Burlingame](#) On July 7, 2010 @ 9:39 pm

What an honest and insightful post, Emily. I believe we graduated from school at the same time and I as well have felt my faith faltering a bit as of late. I'm in a slightly more dire position though, since my grant funding is running out and I'm back on the job market. Nothing is more disillusioning than a dearth of jobs and the attendant swell of applicants...I almost feel at times that I've hitched my wagon to a dying star. I'm impressed and encouraged with how proactively you've dealt with your situation and your stalwart commitment to the library community.

At the same time, would it be entirely heretical to urge for some clemency towards the failings of the commercial world? In between various official librarianship events last month, I attended a local idea sharing festival for technologists and media entrepreneurs. Sure I was a bit out of place, but I was also inspired by the energy, creativity, and bravery of this community. I LOVE the transparency and consensus driven, collaborative ethos of librarians but I also wish that didn't have to come at the cost of innovation, speed, and guts. Too often I feel as though the library community dismisses new ideas, systems, and products as "too sexy" only to reluctantly adopt them once they hit mainstream and become de rigueur in the user community. Ultimately, I guess I just don't like the "us" and "them" mentality. I agree with Derik...all interests should be mutually beneficial in the end...ask (or demand) and ye shall receive.

Anyway, just thought I'd chime in. Congratulations on your new job and so very sorry we didn't get to meet up in DC!

#6 Comment By [africker](#) On July 8, 2010 @ 4:49 am

I already knew the classmark for Diabetic Foot without the need for electronic support.

Readers love it when they mention a topic / title and you immediately know where it will be.

At least that is what I tell myself – that shaking head may be of fear rather than of amazement.

#7 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On July 8, 2010 @ 11:28 am

I agree that management issues can have a lot to do with mojo. Maybe not being challenged by a manager or assisted in the ways that one needs assistance (acknowledgement, as you mention, or proper training, or the push to get out there and do good things) also has something to do with it?

What you're saying in the second part about making sure the public knows our worth and our resources a big YES! Advocacy with legislators, but also informing our communities would help a lot. But it's hard. What is effective? How do we get the word out? And, how can we work up the chain to make some pro-active changes into the management positions when we have no mojo to get there?

#8 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On July 8, 2010 @ 11:30 am

Thanks, Kat. I have pondered whether I might be better suited working for a company, to tell you the truth. It seems like I'd actually be able to "git 'er done" in that kind of environment rather than waiting for large bureaucratic beasts like academic libraries and ALA to get the ball rolling on new ideas.

And I do agree also, that companies, which create products for libraries, can be a good thing. I just think too often the model is skewed. There ARE good examples and good relationships out there.

#9 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On July 8, 2010 @ 11:32 am

That's great that you knew that without electronic support. I haven't been in the field long enough to have learned it, or had enough reference transactions to commit it to memory. Do you have a cheat sheet?

#10 Comment By [africker](#) On July 12, 2010 @ 7:32 am

We have a quick NLM guide stuck to the wall by the books though I doubt it would go down to Diabetic Foot level!

There was a lovely sequence of strips in Unshelved when the catalogue went down ^[29]
I am not this bad.

#11 Comment By [Jean Costello](#) On July 13, 2010 @ 6:31 am

Hi Phil – I'm a patron library blogger and love your idea about public libraries becoming a hub of discourse. I so need it and would bet a lot of other citizens feel that way too.

I wrote a post about it last week, in ^[30].

Library director Michael Baldwin also called for it in 2002 in ^[31].

#12 Comment By [Phil](#) On July 18, 2010 @ 9:31 pm

Thanks, Jean. What I need to do is get off of my duff and write up something formal. Maybe ItLwtLP would have me?

#13 Comment By [RT](#) On July 19, 2010 @ 2:07 am

It's never a bad idea to quote the wisdom of the philosopher McKinley Morganfield.

I work in a special library. I am the only librarian in my organization, so I sometimes need to explain to people what I do and why it's valuable.

Not long after I read this article, I got a note from a top manager who is retiring. He said my work is valuable and that I am good at it. That's always nice to hear and should keep me going for some months! Such a little thing, but few managers do it.

#14 Comment By [Kim Leeder](#) On July 21, 2010 @ 4:29 pm

Hey, sure Phil. All are welcome to submit a guest post! ^[32]

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URL to article: <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2010/tryin-to-get-my-mojo-workin/>

URLs in this post:

[1] mojo working: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjPezeHN9Hc>

[2] Multnomah County Library: <http://www.multcolib.org/>

[3] book: <http://www.worldcat.org/title/mojo-how-to-get-it-how-to-keep-it-how-to-get-it-back-if-you-lose-it/oclc/476359804>

[4] Marshall Goldsmith: <http://marshallgoldsmithlibrary.com/>

[5] Urban Dictionary: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/>

[6] mojo: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=mojo>

[7] National Library of Medicine: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/>

[8] announced: http://www.nlm.nih.gov/pubs/techbull/ma10/ma10_go_local_discontinue.html

- [9] Outreach: <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2009/outreach-is-undead/>
- [10] red books: <http://books.google.com/books?id=LQwoAAAAAAJ&ots=CXtu9S2WWk&dq=library%20of%20congress%20red%20book&pg=PA965#v=onepage&q&f=false>
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- [12] wrote: <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2009/w-e-b-s-i-t-e-find-out-what-it-means-to-me/>
- [13] unethical library vendors: <http://librarianinblack.net/librarianinblack/2010/04/vendors.html>
- [14] boycott: http://www.libraryjournal.com/lj/home/885271-264/uc_libraries_nature_publishing_group.html.csp
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- [17] How We Decide: <http://www.jonahlehrer.com/books>
- [18] ALA Connect's: <http://connect.ala.org/>
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